

Making the Most of Your Church, Pt. 2

Scripture: Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 14:37

Code: QA179

The church has changed a great deal over the centuries, having become more complex and businesslike. Today it is a massive organization with denominations, commissions, committees, councils, boards, and programs. It quite often functions like a business rather than a body, a factory rather than a family, and a corporation rather than a community.

The church also has become obsessed with success, establishing superficial goals and awarding prizes to those who can pack the most people into the pews on Sundays. Many church leaders panic when the line starts dropping on the graph, indicating a drop in attendance and finances. As a result many churches have become nothing more than entertainment centers, giving performances to passive herds of unproductive churchgoers. Such devices bring people into the church, but are unable to produce any genuine, *biblical* growth once they come.

Back to the Blueprint

Acts 2:42 gives the blueprint the early Christians followed: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Those things make up the actual function and life of the church. Each is vital.

In the last article, we looked at the makeup of the congregation—Christ blesses and builds a church committed to making sure its members are *true* Christians. Let's keep moving...

The Essential Activities

Biblical Teaching. The early church might not have had a New Testament, but it had the "apostles' teaching," which was the Word of God. Paul said, "The things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment" (1 Corinthians 14:37). He claimed unequivocally that everything he taught about God, His gospel, and His church was God's own teaching. God gave His Word through the apostles.

The church at Jerusalem was committed to giving and receiving the Word of God. In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul says, "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." God never intended the church to be an entertainment center where people merely engage in "spectator sports." He wants us to reproduce ourselves in others.

Doctrine is the basis of the church. No one can live out what he doesn't know. Paul instructed Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2-3). That time has come. If we don't teach truth, how will we recognize error when it comes? Don't ever allow anyone to stand in the pulpit who isn't committed to teaching the Word of

God.

Fellowship. Some believe you can't have fellowship in a big church. Yet according to Acts 2, *three thousand* people continued steadfastly in the first church fellowship. Fellowship (Gk., *koinonia*) suggests sharing and communion—a common ground. In the context of Christianity, it refers to a common participation in the eternal life of God, salvation provided by Christ, and blessing of the indwelling Spirit. With that as our common ground, we're to share our lives by loving one another as well as praying for, edifying, exhorting, and giving to one another. No matter the size of the group, we can always give our lives to those God brings across our path.

Unfortunately, many Christians fail to participate fully in a local congregation. And many who do come to church sit in lonely isolation, never becoming involved. Hebrews 10:24-25 is a healthy reminder to such people: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." We truly need each other.

The central focus of the early church's fellowship was breaking bread—the Lord's Table. It was the symbol of the members' fellowship. All Christians meet at the foot of the cross as sinners saved by the grace of God. That's our common ground. As we remember Christ's sacrifice for us, Communion thus becomes a celebration of our unity and fellowship.

Prayer. Acts 2:42 says people in the Jerusalem church continually devoted themselves to prayer. Those dear Christians remembered the Lord's promise: "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). They acted on it and devoted themselves to corporate prayer.

That type of prayer is often neglected today. The church will be packed for a concert, film, or some extravaganza. But when a prayer meeting is held, only a faithful few trickle in. The church must commit itself to prayer because that's how we acknowledge our total dependence on God.

When the membership is saved and Spirit-filled, and when it is committed to teaching, fellowship, and prayer, a church is following God's blueprint. What, then, is the result?

The Proper Character Instilling Awe

Acts 2:43 says, "Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe." In Scripture the Greek word translated "awe" (*phobos*) often speaks of fear in the sense of reverence. It is reserved for special times when people are struck with awe because of something divine or powerful that can't be explained.

Luke 7:11-17 tells us Jesus raised a man from the dead in the midst of his funeral procession. In fact, "The dead man sat up, and began to speak" (v. 15). You can imagine the reaction that caused! Verse 16 says, "Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God." The eyewitnesses were left with a sense of awe for the wonder that had just occurred in their midst.

The church ought to be able to instill awe in the community. Members of that first church certainly did. Verse 43 says *everyone* was in awe of them. The very existence of the church was inexplicable. One day there was no church; the next day there were 3,000 people in it!

Manifesting God's Power

Acts 2:43 says, "Many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles." In New Testament times God gave the apostles power to perform miracles to confirm what they preached. But once His Word was complete and recorded for us in Scripture, miracles were no longer necessary.

Nonetheless God's power remains on display. He heals people of their hurts, puts broken homes back together, and brings people out of the bondage of sin to Christ. In short, He transforms lives. When the church follows God's design, He will do marvelous and powerful things, and the world will take notice.

Loving One Another

Acts 2:44-46 says, "All those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together." I'd like to take the phrase "All those who had believed were together" and put it up as a banner above the church to signify Christian unity. Unfortunately we can't say that about most churches today.

The early church was full of love—its people "had all things in common." They didn't own anything to the exclusion of someone who had a need. The Greek verbs translated "began selling" and "were sharing" are in the imperfect tense, implying believers were continually selling and sharing their resources as needed. That doesn't refer to a communistic ideal where everyone pooled their resources and doled them out equally. That wouldn't have given the people the opportunity to express love. In part inequalities exist in the church to give us that opportunity. The early church expressed a love that was obvious to the community.

When awesome, powerful, loving people are placed in an unbelieving community, there will be results. And the church with the proper content and character will have the right things happen.

When You Follow the Directions

Acts 2:46 says Christians did everything "with gladness." The church will have happy people. The first church was happy because members were making an impact on the world, loving each other, and seeing God at work—all because they had followed God's design.

Verse 47 adds that they were "praising God." While so much of this world is in rebellion against God, there are small pockets of believers who offer Him praise. The church had joy because it focused on God's glory and praised Him accordingly. Conflict in the church has no place among those who focus on the preeminence of God. Joy comes from unity, and unity comes from everyone's praising God.

Acts 2:47 concludes by saying that believers in the church were "having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." The Lord added

people to the church because of its favorable lifestyle. A godly church is attractive.

It's my desire to see the church grow, and I'm sure you share that goal. If we are committed to following God's blueprint and displaying the proper character in our churches, the church as a whole will grow to the glory of God. My prayer is that we will let God build the church His way so the gates of hell won't prevail against it as we await our Lord's return. If you want to make the most of your church, just follow the blueprint, and encourage your church leaders to do the same.

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